

Giardia Outbreaks Continue In Pa.

UNIVERSITY PARK (Centre Co.) — If you drink from an unfiltered source of surface water, you are at risk for a waterborne disease. In fact, you already may be carrying a disease-causing organism such as the microscopic giardia lamblia without even knowing it. "Giardiasis probably is more common than we think," said Wil-

liam Sharpe, professor of forest hydrology in Penn State's College of Agriculture. "The organism can remain in your system for long periods of time without causing symptoms. Some people build an immunity, and for some it's chronic — they're never completely cured."

Sharpe said high risk groups for

giardiasis are users of municipal water from unfiltered or poorly filtered surface sources, hikers and campers who drink from streams or other unfiltered sources, and international travelers.

Communities have few options when giardia is found in their water. The contaminated source can be abandoned, water can be

purchased from neighboring communities, or expensive treatment facilities can be installed.

Sharpe said because giardia is resistant to normal levels of chlorine disinfectant, the most reliable treatment method for giardia is a combination of disinfection and filtration. Under Department of Environmental Resources regulations, Pennsylvania's more than 200 public water systems using unfiltered surface sources have until 1995 to install filtration equipment. Sharpe said some communities may be hard-pressed to meet that deadline.

In the meantime, the choices are limited for consumers whose water supply becomes contaminated with giardia. You can boil drinking water, buy bottled water, or buy and install a "point-of-use" filter.

Sharpe said consumer information on home filters is hard to come by, but he recommends checking "Consumer Reports" and looking for products which have the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) seal. "Any giardia filter should be able to remove particles as small as two microns in size, and should be used only in combination with chlorine or another disinfectant," Sharpe said.

What is this tiny creature that wreaks havoc with our drinking water supplies? "Giardia is a protozoan parasite found in mammals such as beavers that live in or near

water," said Sharpe. The organism can enter surface water through an animal's feces. "It's rarely found in groundwater because the soil acts as a natural filter," he said.

The parasite forms a cyst or protective cover that allows it to survive for long periods of time without a host. The cyst is usually between 5 and 11 microns in size (one micron is equal to 1/1,000 of a millimeter). After being ingested, the protozoan attaches itself to the intestinal wall, causing flu-like symptoms such as fever, diarrhea, nausea, and abdominal cramps.

Since DER began a giardia surveillance program in 1985, at least 70 unfiltered public water systems have been identified as having one or more sources contaminated with giardia. Nine outbreaks of giardiasis linked to public water systems have led to at least 1,400 cases of the disease since 1979. More than 650,000 people have been adversely affected by boil water advisories or other restrictions due to the presence of disease organisms in their water supplies.

In addition to causing illness and inconvenience, giardia can be costly. A 1983 giardiasis outbreak in Luzerne County cost an estimated \$55 million for medical care, lost work, lost business profits, and replacement of contaminated water.

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